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ABSTRACT

An introductory section providing background information on the Virginia Department of Education's (VaDOE) pilot education project for 4-year-olds is followed by discussion of the project and its evaluation. Discussion also concerns the forms of collaboration that are likely to increase the use of data by three classes of information users, namely, the VaDOE Division of Elementary Administration, which implemented the program; the teachers who provided the program; and the Virginia Council on Child Day Care and Early Childhood Programs. In its third year of operation, the pilot project involved 27 teachers who had served several hundred children in one private and numerous public school districts and classrooms. Each program participating in the study implemented either a center-based model emphasizing appropriate classroom experiences or a home-based model emphasizing parent education. Teachers were trained by means of the High/Scope curriculum and VaDOE's Developmental Language Instruction methods. Thirteen research questions were developed into a program evaluation and a longitudinal research design. Data were gathered through classroom observations, pre- and posttesting, and ethnographic interviews. Concluding discussion focuses on deterrents to the full use of the collaboration model. (RH)

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Evaluation and Program Implementation: Collaboration During a Three-Year Pilot Project

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Introduction

On March 26, 1986, Governor Gerald L. Baliles appointed the Governor's Commission on Excellence in Education and charged its fifteen members to make recommendations that would "place Virginia in the first rank of states in the quality of education" (Governor's Commission on Excellence in Education, 1986). Seven months later the Commission provided a report with 36 recommendations, the first of which called for voluntary preschool programs for four-year-olds, to begin with at-risk children and later to expand to include all four-year-old children. In response, the Division of Elementary Administration of the Virginia Department of Education (VaDOE) began to make plans for a three-year pilot project which began in the fall of 1987.

A study of the pilot project was proposed by the VaDOE at the same time that the legislature's Subcommittee to Study Early Childhood Programs and Public School Day Care Programs began to express interest in this area. Though funding issues caused delays during the initial planning phase, the study was finally approved in November, 1987. The project, conducted by the VaDOE Division of Research and Testing, was supported by Chapter II funds in the first two years and by state monies in the third year.

In addition to the direction of the Governor's Commission on Excellence in Education and the efforts of the VaDOE, significant events outside of the education community provided background for creation of a state council whose expressed purpose was to coordinate and facilitate the development of care and education systems for young children. In 1987 the Governor of Virginia convened a state planning conference on child day care. Among the recommendations of the 300 individuals attending that conference was a call for a state-level, centralized office to promote and encourage quality child day care. Echoing that recommendation was a report to the Governor (Virginia Department of Children, 1988) of 14 of the state's top corporate managers, stating the need for child care and early childhood programs in order to assure a productive and stable work force. In late 1988, a formal proposal was jointly presented by the state Secretary of Health and Human Resources and the Secretary of Education to the legislature seeking to eliminate the separation between child day care and preschool education. This proposal resulted in legislation passed by the General Assembly, causing the Virginia Council on Child Day Care and Early Childhood Programs to be established as of July 1, 1989. This Council represents large and small businesses, the child care community, municipal and county governments, school districts, local social service agencies, Head Start, citizens, and parents. When the VaDOE pilot project ends in June 1990, the responsibility of maintaining those programs will go the local school districts, and the decision to set up more programs throughout the state passes to the Council.

Description of the pilot project: Virginia's Programs For Four-Year-Olds

Programs

In the fall of 1987, eight public school districts (called divisions in Virginia) and one private school volunteered to participate in the pilot project. Three more districts joined the project for its second year. With the addition of these districts and the addition of classrooms in two districts, the number of teachers participating increased from 15 to 23. For the third year of the pilot project, the number of programs remained the same, while the number of teachers participating increased to 27. The total number of children served during the first two years of the pilot project was 288 and 482, respectively. Data to determine the third year total are not complete at this time.

Eight of the public school programs were initiated when their district joined the pilot project, and all were implemented using Chapter I funds. Three public school programs were in existence prior to the pilot project; two agreed to adopt the pilot curriculum, and the third,

which had previously been using the pilot curriculum, agreed to provide data to the project. Two of these existing programs were supported by local monies and one used Chapter I funds. All of the programs used the High/Scope curriculum (Hohmann, Banet, & Weikart, 1979) selected by the VaDOE.

Instructional Models

Each program participating in the pilot project selected one of two delivery models offered by the VaDOE: a center-based model or a home-based model. Although both models included a classroom experience for the children, the center-based model's primary emphasis was on providing appropriate educational experiences in the classroom while the home-based model's emphasis was on parent education. Ten of the programs chose the center-based model, with the amount of child contact varying from 9 to 26.25 hours per week.

One program chose the home-based model due to the lack of available classroom space. In this district the teacher visited her students' homes to teach the parents how to help their children learn. The remaining program implemented a variation on the home-based model using instructional packets rather than home visits to communicate with parents. Both of these programs focused on training the parents and, therefore, involved fewer classroom hours.

Role of the VaDOE

The VaDOE Division of Elementary Administration arranged for teachers to receive three days of initial introductory training on the High/Scope curriculum during the summer of 1987. Because of the pilot project's emphasis on growth in language use, teachers were also introduced to methods for facilitating language learning through the Developmental Language Instruction (DLI) project of the VaDOE Division of Special Education Programs. These three days of additional training also occurred during the summer of 1987.

Further training on the High/Scope curriculum was arranged by the VaDOE Division of Elementary Administration for the summer of 1988, the spring of 1989, and the summer of 1989. Summer sessions were of a three-day duration, and the spring session lasted one and one-half days. Half-day regional meetings, held in two locations in the state, were conducted by the elementary staff on five occasions throughout the three-year pilot project. A final meeting of those involved with Virginia's pilot programs will be held this May.

In addition to setting up and providing training for teachers and program administrators, the elementary staff members took responsibility for one, two, or three of the pilot programs. The staff visited their assigned program(s) twice a year and were available on an ongoing basis to provide technical assistance and support.

Description of the Research Project

The study evolved from a set of thirteen research questions (see Table 1) produced by the VaDOE Division of Elementary Administration. These questions were developed into both a program evaluation and a longitudinal research design. In response to the wishes and needs of the elementary staff, the research staff designed a two-pronged project consisting of a Program Implementation Study (the evaluation) and a Follow-up Study (the longitudinal research). The purpose of the Program Implementation Study was to provide ongoing feedback to the elementary staff in order to help identify instructional and curricular variations as well as concerns from the teachers and administrators at the program sites that might signal the need for further training or assistance. This component of the research also provided estimates of the extent of program implementation for later use when interpreting program outcomes. The Follow-up Study (to be reported separately) will determine the long-term impact of the programs upon children by comparing data collected on program participants and groups of comparison students who did not participate in the program.

Table 1
Research questions generated by the Division of Elementary Administration, Virginia Department of Education

How did the training affect implementation?
Was the training adequate?
How well is the High/Scope curriculum being followed?
How well is the DLI Program being implemented?
What kinds of parent involvement are included?
What obstacles were found in implementation?
What are kindergarten promotion rates for these children as compared to a control group?
How do these children score on the first grade Cognitive Abilities Test as compared to a control group?
What percent of the participating children are later placed in special education?
What is the promotion rate of these children?
What effect does the amount of center-based time for children produce?
To what extent do the parents implement the training in both models?
What differences in outcomes result from the two models?

Classroom Observations

The quality of curriculum implementation has been shown to be critical in the impact of early childhood education. Implementation quality in this study was assessed using the Preschool Classroom Implementation Rating Instrument-Revised (PCI) (Frede & Miller, 1989) developed initially for the evaluation of South Carolina's program for four-year-olds, which implemented the same High/Scope developmental curriculum used in Virginia.

Observers in the first year of the study were the five staff members of the VaDOE Division of Elementary Administration and three contracted observers. Each pilot classroom was visited by a member of the elementary staff in February or March and then again in May. With few exceptions, each of these observations was followed, soon thereafter, by a contractor-visit to check for interrater agreement.

During the second and third years of the study, classroom visits were made in the fall and the spring, with all observations conducted by two contracted observers. Each classroom was visited once during both observation periods.

Pre and Posttesting

A second component of the Program Implementation Study focused on knowledge gains of the students in the programs as measured by pretest and posttest assessment. Student scores were provided to the research staff for analysis. In the first two years of the study, programs individually selected their test, resulting in the use of a variety of early childhood instruments. For the third year of the research, all but one program used the Diagnostic Scale of the Bracken Basic Concept Scale (Bracken, 1984) to measure change in the students from the beginning to the end of the year.

Ethnographic interviews

Interviews with teachers and administrators during the first year were conducted by two experienced early childhood teachers attending graduate school in early childhood education at the University of Virginia. In the second year another graduate student joined the

ethnographic team to replace one member who graduated and returned to teaching. All three members of the team were trained and supervised by an early childhood specialist trained as an ethnographer. Interviews were undertaken to collect information concerning opinions and attitudes toward the program and toward the children that might have bearing on program success. The ethnographers' work focused on the 15 teachers participating in the pilot project in both the first and second years.

Collaboration and Data Utilization

The purpose of evaluation is to produce information that is meaningful and useful. Toward this end, it is critical that the evaluators first identify the primary users of the evaluation. Working closely with these information users throughout the evaluation process, rather than merely presenting data at the conclusion of the project, is more likely to lead to program decision making and improvement (Patton, 1986).

In the case of the Virginia evaluation project, it became evident that three groups of people could benefit from the evaluation data -- (1) the program implementers, (2) the program providers, and (3) planners of future programs for four-year-olds. Because of the formative emphasis of the evaluation project, collaboration between the evaluators and the first two groups of information users was feasible during the evaluation process, and use of the results could have and appears to have influenced operation of the programs. However, collaboration between the evaluators and the third group of information users is just beginning as the three-year pilot project comes to a close. Data utilization, in this case, could affect future programs for four-year-olds.

Collaborative efforts that increase the likelihood of data utilization on the part of the three information users are discussed below.

Information User #1: The Program Implementers
VaDOE Division of Elementary Administration

Initial planning steps for the program included the formation of an advisory committee made up of four members of the elementary staff and representatives from various offices within the VaDOE. The inclusion of both lead evaluators from the VaDOE Division of Research and Testing on this committee laid the foundation for the evaluator-user partnership that was enjoyed throughout the project.

In his book *Utilization-Focused Evaluation*, Patton (1986) speaks of the benefits of the information user feeling ownership in the evaluation project. In Virginia's project this appeared to be the case with the input from the elementary staff in developing the 13 research questions, but, in addition to that, the early collaboration described above also allowed the *evaluators* to feel ownership in the *program*.

In the first year of the Program Implementation Study, more collaboration between the evaluators and the program implementers was possible during the training on using the PCI and in the subsequent classroom observations. All five members of the elementary staff, one of the lead evaluators, and two graduate students from the team of ethnographic interviewers received four days of PCI training. Elementary staff members reported that being a part of the research team for that year made them more aware of the various facets of the High/Scope curriculum and, therefore, better prepared to provide technical assistance when visiting their assigned program(s).

In January of the second year of the pilot project the lead evaluators and members from the ethnographic team met with the elementary staff to share data from the classroom observation and ethnographic components of the evaluation project. Another meeting with the elementary staff in the summer prior to the third year allowed the lead evaluators to provide feedback from the first two years of classroom observations, citing patterns, such as score improvements

subsequent to training, and highlighting areas of strengths and weaknesses in curriculum implementation.

Finally, the contact and collegiality between the elementary and research staffs did not end with the examples cited above. Numerous occasions when members of the elementary and research staffs met to exchange information, plot strategy, or just share a laugh have gone undocumented.

Information User #2: The Program Providers
The Teachers

During the past three years, the elementary staff organized a total of ten training meetings for the teachers in Virginia's pilot project. All of these meetings were attended by one or more members of the research team. During five of those workshops time was allowed for a research staff member to give a presentation, either to explain the goals of the research project and steps to reach those goals, to give up-date reports on what had been accomplished, or to present aggregated findings from the PCI. In addition to keeping the teachers informed about the research project, participation in these meetings served two other purposes: (1) direct participation in the training allowed the research staff more intimate understanding of the training teachers were experiencing, and (2) extended contact with both teachers and their program administrators allowed familiarity with the research staff, hopefully enhancing their level of trust.

Teachers attending the summer training session prior to the final year of the pilot project were given the opportunity to meet with one of the lead evaluators to discuss in a confidential setting their classroom's scores on the PCI. Feedback to teachers who had been in the pilot program for two years included a comparison of the average score for each year (an average of the four observations in the first year and the two observations in the second year). Several teachers who were not present at the summer training received feedback on their classroom's scores in the fall.

Information User #3: Planners of Future Programs for Four-Year-Olds
The Virginia Council on Child Day Care and Early Childhood Programs

Some of the Council's funds will be used to provide grants for local demonstration projects to test various delivery models for services to at-risk young children. The Council staff will be responsible for designing and undertaking evaluation studies of the different programs for day care and early education proposed as demonstration projects by the localities. These studies will need to look not only at program quality and efficacy but also at such dimensions as management efficiency and fiscal accountability, as the projects will become models upon which to base other programs across the state. To undertake these broad evaluations with limited resources, the Council intends to collaborate closely with evaluation staffs from other agencies to meet the needs of the programs. The intent is to keep the efforts of these agencies in close concert with the needs of localities, to utilize established strategies (our favorites being those of Patton, 1986), and to undertake evaluations likely to provide practical and accessible information to the agencies, localities, and the legislature. The evaluation and research lessons learned from the VaDOE efforts will serve to guide the Council as it builds in the assessment of additional dimensions such as program cost and the comparison of varying delivery models, as well as those needs already identified by the VaDOE evaluation work such as intensive parental involvement and full-day programming.

Reflections and Visions

As the Program Implementation Study comes to a close, the lead evaluators can reflect on the current evaluation project and envision future ones. As efforts to use a collaboration model in our research project have been described above, only deterrents to its full use will be discussed here.

The evaluation project's first fumble occurred when the teachers asked to view the observation instrument that would be used when members of the research staff visited their classrooms. This request was initially approved, but, after consulting with the first author of the instrument, it was determined that the PCI should be withheld. It was felt that the instument's comprehensiveness might overwhelm teachers who were new to the High/Scope curriculum and, therefore, cause undue anxiety.

The research team was not immediately aware of the disquietude caused by this decision. Several months later when this was brought to their attention, a letter was sent to each program administrator suggesting that teachers refer to the curriculum checklists in the back of their manual *Young Children In Action* (Hohmann, Banet, & Weikart, 1979). Most of the items on the PCI were included in these checklists for self-evaluation. The letter went on to explain that the purpose of the classroom observations was to capture a sense of the overall implementation of the High/Scope curriculum and *not* to conduct a teacher evaluation.

This action seemed to mitigate the situation, in that the evaluators heard no concerns voiced during the second and third years of the project. Perhaps teachers had just learned to accept this as "the way research was done", or possibly their feelings of concern were dissipated as they became more accustomed to the classroom observations. In any event, it was unfortunate that this situation occurred at the outset of the project when the relationship between evaluator and information user was being established.

Though an explanation of the PCI was given at one of the early regional meetings, it seems this was not sufficient. Describing the 12 subareas of the instrument, explaining the rating scale, and reading aloud sample items did not meet the teachers' need to fully understand the dimensions upon which their classrooms would be rated. In the future, the decision to distribute or not distribute the rating instrument should be carefully considered. If giving teachers ready access to the instrument is viewed as a deterrent to the research, then portions of it could be shown on an overhead projector when explaining its use. This contact with the instrument, though limited, might be adequate to prevent the observation process from being as much a cause of anxiety to the teachers.

Another situation that may have impeded collaborative efforts is the fact that members of both the elementary staff and the research staff had many other job responsibilities besides this project. It is difficult to pinpoint in what ways this ongoing state of operating with little time and few resources may have been a hindrance. Certainly, using a collaborative approach to evaluation takes a great deal of time and effort on the part of both the evaluator and the information user. It is likely that when both parties are stretched too thin the extent of collaboration will be diminished.

Finally, in this retrospective moment, it is important to take a look at the ethnographic component of the evaluation project. Three members of the research team invested a great deal of time and traveled many miles to collect the data. Conducting the teacher and parent interviews required the building of relationships, the coordination of schedules, and copious note taking. This component of the research also put demands on the teachers as they scheduled time to be interviewed and opened their classrooms to more visitors. One teacher, when asked to reminisce about her experience during the three-year pilot project confessed, "It was like working in a glass house." (However, she added quickly that it was all "worth it".) But because of this investment, on the part of the researcher team and the teachers, it seems that the knowledge gained should be equally great.

Yet summarizing these kinds of data and reporting it in a coherent fashion are not easy tasks. Because of these difficulties, it seems, the ethnographic component of the research project was not a powerful source of information for the first two information users. Reports received from the ethnographic team at the completion of the first year of the study were minimal and rendered little additional information not known to the elementary staff (Information User #1) who were already aware of the problems, concerns, and successes experienced at the pilot sites through their twice-yearly visits. However, a final report received in the third year of the study may be extremely helpful as the Council (Information User #3) sets up its demonstration projects.

In addition, the strength of the ethnographic research was diminished because it could not be continued throughout the pilot project due to the lack of resources. This is unfortunate as the elementary staff and the research staff had been advised before the start of the programs (L. J. Schweinhart, personal communication, April 17, 1987) that it takes at least three years for teachers to fully grasp the multifaceted High/Scope curriculum and to feel at ease with their role as teacher, parent-educator, recorder of children's behavior, and program advocate. It would have been preferable to have had this complete metamorphosis documented.

In looking to the future, the challenge now before us is to see if together we can design and implement evaluation work yielding knowledge that has a significant impact on public policymaking as we move forward in developing programs for the children of Virginia. Some of our major questions will be: (1) What kinds of services best promote the strength of the family unit while at the same time provide strong support to the work force? (2) What kinds of systems and services are most helpful to children, parents, businesses, and educators? (3) What kinds of parental involvement are appropriate or necessary for different kinds of early childhood programs? (4) What kinds of quality programs are most easily adopted and maintained by localities? (5) What kinds and what level of support from the Council are necessary to promote quality programs in the localities? (6) What kinds of regulations promote desired outcomes? (7) Are existing delivery systems of sufficient quality and scope to produce desired outcomes? If not, how must they be changed? (8) What levels and kinds of education and training of child care/education staff are necessary to produce desired outcomes? (9) What kinds of programs and what kinds of transitions between different programs maintain desired program effects? (10) Are quality early childhood programs in and of themselves sufficient to produce long-term benefits for children and society? (11) What kinds of services are necessary components to define quality? (12) Do different school curricula interact differently with early childhood programming? For example, does the curriculum in the primary grades--currently under fire for its inappropriateness--erode the effects of quality early childhood programming? (13) What level of program quality is necessary to produce significant and meaningful long-term differences in child, family, and work force outcomes?

We hope the next several years of collaboration between evaluator and information user will begin to show us how to operationalize these questions as well as to help provide us with their answers.

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